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Rules

For the

DISCERNING

Of the

Present Times.

Recommended

To the People of God, in *New-England.*

In a

Sermon

Preached on the Lecture in *Boston*; *November* 27*th.* 1692.

By Samuel Willard.

Eccl. 8. 5. *A Wise Mans Heart discerneth both Time and Judgment.*

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RULES

For the

DISCERNING

Of the

Preſent Times. &c.

Math. 16. 3.

O Ye Hypocrites, Ye can diſcern the Face of the Skie, but can Ye not diſcern the Signs of the Times?

THe Occaſion of theſe words, ſpoken by Chriſt himſelf to the *Phariſees* and *Sadduces*, we ſhall find in the Hiſtory. We read at the latter end of the foregoing *Chapter*, that Chriſt had been ſhewing

of his Divine power, in a miraculous feeding of a multitude with a few Loaves and Fishes; which one would have thought should have sufficiently convinced them who he was; even the expected *Messias*. Upon this, in the beginning of this *Chapter*, we have the *Pharisees* and *Sadducees coming to him, and asking a sign of him, verse* 1. And this was just as he had been giving of them an eminent one: So impertinent doth unbelief make men to be. Our Saviour hereupon very suitably in *v.* 2. 3. Sharply reproves them for not making use of those Signs which they had: and this reproof he establisheth upon the consideration of their curiosity in observing, and aptness to conclude from their observation of Natural and Fallible Signs with respect to Fair and Foul Weather; in Conjunction with their Dulness and Incogitancy in observing, and Incredulity in concluding about greater and more Momentous affairs; *Viz. The Signs of the Times.*

Our Text is the Reddition of this Comparison, or the Conviction it self which he applies from the foregoing consideration.

In the words then we may observe these Two things.

1. An Exprobation, or a Contumelious Title which

which he puts upon them; *O ye Hypocrites*: An *Hypocrite* is one that makes a fair and diſſembling ſhew of ſomething that he intends not: theſe pretended to an earneſt deſire of being informed about Chriſt and his Authority, but it was a meer pretence.

2. The ground or reaſon of this Exprobation, *Ye can diſcern* &c. The Sum is, that they had ſtudied and gotten skill in a matter of ſo little moment, and yet were unacquainted with things of the higheſt concernment. *Viz. The Signs of the Times.*

A Sign is ſomething that repreſents ſome other thing unto us, and gives us ſome notification about it. We are by it inſtructed about ſomething elſe, and we may from it receive information, make obſervation, and draw concluſions accordingly.

Now theſe Signs are either *Natural*, or *Poſitive* and *Inſtituted*. *Natural* are ſuch as have in them a Natural Connexion with the thing ſignified, or the reaſon of the ſignification is in the nature of them. Such were theſe in the Skie here-mentioned: thus Natural Cauſes are Signs of thoſe effects that are indicated by them: ſo proper accidents are Signs of their Subjects; and many the like. *Poſitive* or *Inſtituted* are ſuch as are ſo made by appointment, which puts their ſigni-

fication into them ; and that whether of *God* or of *Man*. Of mans appointment ; ſo was *Rahabs Scarlet Thread* to be a *Sign* to the Spies, *Joſh.* 2. 18. Of Gods appointment ; ſo the *Rainbow* was given to *Noah*, *Gen.* 9. 12, 13. And *Circumciſion* to *Abraham*, *Chapt.* 17. 10. For a *Sign*. Thus all thoſe things which the Scripture Predicted ſhould come to paſs, either as Forerunners, or Concomitants of Chriſts Coming and Appearance in the Fleſh, were to be Signs by which men were to know it, and to Judge of it : and theſe ſeem to be more peculiarly the things which Chriſt aims at in our Text.

There are alſo *Mixt* and *Moral Signs*, which are partly of *Inſtitution*, and partly have a *Moral Influence* into the things which they ſignifie ; and have a real ſignification in them.

By the *Signs of the Times* we may here underſtand ſuch Tokens by which we are advantaged to Judge what Times we are fallen into, and what Prognoſticks may be made of them, on a Moral account.

The word here uſed for *Diſcerning*, is of a middle ſignification ; it is ſometimes uſed for debating and heſitating in a matter that is dubious and we are at a loſs to determine about it ; and ſometimes for Judging rationally of things, and drawing

drawing Conclusions from premiſes, whether probable or certain, according to the force there appears to be in them, and in this latter Senſe, we are here to take it: Hence.

DOCTRINE

It is an Important Duty lying upon the People of God to labour after a skill in diſcerning the Signs of the Times which they live in.

Our Saviour here upbraids theſe *Phariſees*, who were men that pretended high to Religion, and would be thought to outdo others in the knowledge and practice of it, yet they were unacquainted in this great affair: they were times wherein men were in great expectation, and yet they did not underſtand theſe ſignal diſcoveries which God then made in his Providence.

The importance of this Duty will briefly appear, if we lay theſe things together.

1. That there are varieties of Times which paſs over men. The times are not always alike, there are good days, and there are evil days: there is a *day of proſperity*, and a *day of adverſity*:

a time of peace and a time of trouble. The wise man makes such an observation as this in, *Eccl.* 3. *begin.* and they are the various aspects of Gods providence upon men that make these differences in the times; for it is he who orders all the changes that go over men, whether publick or private, this *David* confesseth in, *Psa.* 31. 15. *My times are in thy Hand.*

2. That there are *Signs* of these *Times.* God is wont frequently to foresignify to men what revolutions there are likely to come upon them. There are certain indications or forerunning Symptoms, which as they intimate what the present times are, and what remarks are to be made upon them, so they carry in them the Prognostick of what days are coming. As to *Natural Signs* which some pretend to from *Astrological* Observations, and Predictions grounded thereupon, I meddle not with them, nor is there any credit to be given to those that do; and it is to be lamented that so many Christians are seduced into a good Opinion of them: But as to *Moral* and *Instituted* Signs, they are such as God himself hath therefore appointed in his word, because he would have men to improve them: and therefore it is his Command, *Jer.* 10. 2. *Learn not the way of the Heathen, and be not dismayed at the Signs of Heaven*: so also we have the complaint of the Church in *Psal.* 74. 9. *We see not our Signs.*

2. These

3. These signs are capable of being discerned, not only the things themselves that are signs may be known, but under this consideration as they are so: *i. e.* there may be a discovery made of the thing signified by them. The very reason why God hath appointed them to be signs, is that men may so be instructed by them; and hereupon they would lose their end of being so, if they were not to be understood; nor yet would men come under blame from God for their not discerning of them, as they do, *Text*. There are therefore such Rules given us in the word of God, as are for our discretion in this regard, and according unto which we may and ought to judge of the times; only if we would not mistake or fall short in our Judgment, and be led into errour, we must be Critical, and take pains in the Application of these Rules.

4. There are special Duties relating to these times as they are circumstanced. As the disposing of the times according to his Holy pleasure, is one part of the Government of the World by God; so, as they have any reference to mankind, they have a respect to his *special Government*, which always hath an eye to the Law of that Government, according unto which God manageth the affairs of this sort of beings, & for that reason there is a *Moral* consideration to be had of them, because they have a regard to the Rule of Relative Justice, which God hath Fixed: from which it follows, that there are *Moral Duties* to be

ticularly inferred from them. There is a voice in every turn of providence which passeth over men, and it speaks to them, signifying what it is that God requires of them at such a time, and it highly concerns them to hear it, that so they may practice accordingly: and these Duties vary as to their speciality, as the times vary; hence that. *Eccl.* 7. 14. *in the day of Prosperity rejoyce; and in the days of adversity consider.*

5. The way for men to know these Duties is by *Discerning the times.* It is true, there are the General Duties of Religion which are accommodated to all times, we are to *trust in God at all times*, and whatever difficulties and darknesses are upon us, we are to *Pray evermore*, and not to be discouraged at any thing that would perswade us that God hears us not: we are without ceasing to *serve the Lord with fear, and rejoyce with trembling*: these Duties can never be out of season, let the Times be what they will. But there are more particular engagements lying upon us, which are urged from the times, and the arguments to press them upon us are to be fetched from thence: there is a present work to be done, somthing that GOD NOW more eminently calls for, and it is pointed unto by the time it selfe, hence is that reproof given unto them *Jer.* 8. 7. *yea the stork in the heavens knoweth her apointed times &c: but my people know not the Judgments of the Lord.* Now, if men do not regard, and thereupon are unacquainted with the time, how shall they

they underſtand what this Duty is that they are now to ſet upon?

6. The conſequence of doing or neglecting of theſe Duties is very great. A peoples happineſs or miſery depend upon it: amiſtake here may prove wofully hazardous to men. If the times for the preſent are good, they may be either continued or loſt, according as men improve them; we may obſerve what a threatning God utters againſt them, *Deut.* 28. 47, 48. becauſe thou ſervedſt not *the Lord with joyfulneſs and gladneſs of heart, for the abundance of all things, therefore ſhalt thou ſerve thine enemies*: if the times are bad, and men carry not anſwerable to them, but contrarily, it is the way to make them worſe, hear what God ſaith, *Iſa.* 22. 12. 13. *In that day the Lord of Hoſts called to weeping, &c. and behold joy and gladneſs, &c. ſurely this iniquity ſhall not be purged from you till you dye.* Nay, if bad times are fore-boded and predicted, men may either precipitate or avert them by their anſwerable demeanure, how eminently have we this exemplified in the men of *Nineveh*: *Jonah* 3. and the truth is, men may thank themſelves, if after their being thus forewarned, they yet fall into miſchief, they might have prevented it, if they had attended the voice of providence, and known the day of their viſitation; hence that expoſtulation, *Iſa.* 48. 18. 19. *oh that thou hadſt hearkned to my commandments, then had thy peace been as a river, &c.* they prove themſelves to be but ſimple fools; for what ſaith the wiſe man? *Prov.* 27.

12. *The prudent foreseeth the evil and hideth himself, but the simple passeth on and is punished.* Hence then the case I am here to endeavour some resolution of is this.

Quest. *By what Rules may we truly and profitably discern the present times?*

A. Here let me premise;

1. That this case may be applied to the Prophetical times mentioned in the Scriptures, which respect that Glorious state of the Church which is believed and expected by the servants of God, in the latter days: That there shall be such a time; that it is stated and determined in the Counsel of God; That there are the signs of its approaching; that the day of it is coming on apace; and that it is our duty soberly to acquaint our selves with the tokens of it, the word of God is our warrant, nor ought they who fear God in *New-England* to look upon themselves or theirs as unconcerned in it, because they dwell in a remote corner of the earth: But I shall altogether wave this in the present enquiry.

2. It might also be extended generally to the whole affair of the people of God in the world at this day, and it would be a profitable speculation; for if we are bound to *pray for the Peace of Jerusalem*, we ought then to be very inquisitive after the condition which the Church is in, that we may accordingly direct our petitions to God in its behalf, and understand what answer our prayers do receive from him, and to neglect it will

will argue that we are but a little concerned about them. But I ſhall not directly intend this neither; although the Rules to be given may be generally applicable; hence,

3. I ſhall direct the reſolution of this caſe more eſpecially to our ſelves, or this little company of a profeſſing people, in this nook or corner of the world; and let it here be obſerved; That although, not only Chriſts *Myſtical* body is but one, but alſo the *Viſible* Church of Chriſt on earth is in ſome reſpects but one too, ſince they do or ought to profeſſe the ſame God, the ſame Chriſt, the ſame Faith, the ſame ordinances, and conſequently are ſubjects of the ſame Government of Chriſt; yet as they are diſperſed up and down in divers places of the world; & therupon are ſeverally combined, the times may be exceedingly diverſified unto them, and conſequently the ſigns be very various: Religion may flouriſh in this place, and it may at the ſame time be under great decays in another; here there may be good, and there may be bad *Symptoms*. Nor doth this only reſpect particular Churches, or Congregations, although theſe alſo may be very unlike, but the Collective body of them too, as they are involved in a more immediate *Communion* one with another in Sacred and Civil reſpects: for God is wont to treat with them in his Providence under the Conſideration of ſuch a people ſo combined, as is evidently to be obſerved from the word of God.

Sig-

Signs, according to the Scripture uſe of the word, are by *Criticks* ranked under three heads. 1. *Indicative* or *notifying* ſigns: ſuch as carry in them a diſcovery of the preſent State of affairs, and tell men what they are to Judge of things as they now are; or give light for a Prediction of ſome future events, having a reaſon in them for this Concluſion, whether *Natural* or *Moral* from which men may raiſe a conjecture of what is neer at hand, or in great likelihood ſhortly to come to paſs: ſuch are the *ſigns of the ſkie* taken notice of. *Text.* Thus the Death of *Hophni* & *Phinehas* in one day, were a *ſign* to *Eli* of the Accompliſhment of all that God had threatned againſt his family, 1. *Sam.*2.34. *this ſhall be a ſign unto thee.* 2. *Monitory*; *viz.* ſuch as carry moral inſtruction in them to others, and bid them to beware: thus the Judgments of God which befall ſome ſinners for Notorious ſins, are ſigns to others, admoniſhing them to conſider what they came for, and beware of expoſing themſelves to the like Judgments by like ſins, leſt they alſo ſuffer as thoſe did; thus *Korah* and his accomplices are ſaid to be *made a ſign in Iſrael*, *numb.* 26.10, and thus God threatens them to *make them a ſign and a Proverb*; *Ezek.* 14. 8.

3. For the *Confirmation* of things done.

There are *Ratifying* Signs. Thus a mans ſetting of his hand to a Deed is called his Signing of it; and thus *Circumciſion* is called a *Sign*, it being given for a Ratification of the Covenant

which

which God made with *Abraham*, Rom. 4. 11. but this laſt is not ſo much of our preſent conſideration; it being the former which the caſe in hand hath a more peculiar Relation unto. Now that we may have a right diſcerning of the preſent times, there are two things which call for our obſervation.

1 *What times are now upon us?*

2 *What aſpects there is upon theſe times?* Or what are the *Symptoms*, and what are *Prognoſticks* of the preſent Times?

1 *What times are now upon us?* And this may come under either a *Phyſical* or *Moral* conſideration: and both of them call for our obſervation.

1. In a Phyſical Conſideration, times are to be accounted either as good or bad, according to the diſpenſations of Providence in Mercies or Afflictions. There is indeed for the moſt part a mixture of theſe, it is ſeldome that times are ſo good, as that it can be ſaid of a People, as it was once of them, 1 King. 5. 4. *There is neither Adverſary, nor evil Occurrent.* Nor is it ordinary, but that the greateſt Affliction are tempered with a mixture of many Mercies, ſo that a Judgment is here to be made according to the prevalent degree of either; and by this Rule, *it is now certainly an evil day with this People*: it is beyond queſtion a time of Trouble; and I think I have no need to go about to reaſon men into a belief of this Aſſertion, whereof

there are ſo many ſenſible Demonſtrations: and doubtleſs Senſe is a competent Judge of ſenſible evils: ſurely ſeeing and feeling is believing in ſuch a caſe: there is no perſwading of one who is under the apprehenſion of acute pains which make him to roar, that all is well with him: I may then paſs over this a a thing beyond doubt.

2. In a moral conſideration, and here the great Enquiry will be, whether theſe Afflictions under which we are, be meerly *probationary*, or not alſo *pœnal*? There is a very great difference between theſe two, and there are Signs by which it is to be proved, and according unto which a judgment is to be made: a miſtake here is dangerous, ſince there are Duties incumbent on us, referring to our State in theſe reſpects: to help us in this regard let us obſerve,

1. I ſuppoſe that the Rule which many take up with, *viz.* that private or perſonal afflictions may be for Trial, but that publick Calamities are always Puniſhments, or Chaſtiſement for ſin, will not hold univerſally. It may poſſibly be true for the moſt part, but it may not be fixed for a certain unerring Rule. That God hath tied himſelf up to this way of proceeding is hard to determine, ſince there may be a reaſon given for his ſo dealing in way of Trial with a People, as well as with a perſon: Nor am I able to give any other account of that Remarkable Paſſage referring to *Hezekiah*, 2 *Chron.* 32. 1.

After

After these things and the establishment of them, Senacherib *King of* Assyria *came and entred into Judah, and encamped against the Fenced Cities*, &c. when was this, but after *Hezekiah* had wrought an eminent Reformation, and Settled the Matters of Religion in the Kingdom? and that in *Asa's* Reign Recorded, 2 *Chron* 16. *begin.* seems to carry the same face upon it; just before, in Chap. 15. 17. God had testified that the heart of *Asa was perfect all his days.* Out of doubt there are follies in the best times, but God doth not impute them, or chide for them, or take the advantage of them to enter into Controversies with his People, *Psal.* 130. 3, 4.

2. Publick Calamities may sometimes be the punishments of some sins that have been long before committed: God is pleased in his Soveraignty sometimes to Reserve his Testimony against them till afterwards, yea till they that were the principals in the committing of them are Dead and Gone; so that a People may be called to look a great way back, if they would find out what is the sign in this respect.

There was a famine which came upon Israel in *Davids* reign. 2. *Sam* 24. *begin.* but upon inquiry, it was found to be for act of unjust cruelty which *Saul* had committed in his reign, and God tells *Moses* that he will *remember* the sin of making the Golden Calf afterwards, *Exod.* 32. 34. whence the Jews have a Proverb, *that in every Judgment that after befel them, there was an Ounce of the*

Calf: and it is very ſignal, that if there hath been no publick Teſtimony of Repentance for ſuch Sins as the Publick hath been involved in, they have juſt ground to believe that God is in ſuch Afflictions calling of thoſe Sins to remembrance, and viſiting for them.

3. Afflictions that are *Pœnal*, do uſually come upon a Generation, for the ſins of the Generation that is ſo Afflicted. It is true, and it often ſo comes to paſs, that their ſins may be *Filling Sins*; what ſaith Chriſt to the Jews of his time, *Mat.* 23. 32. *Fill up the Meaſure of your Fathers*; but however, God himſelf hath given us to underſtand, that if the Children obſerve their Fathers ſins, and take warning by them, and Repent throughly, this ſhall be prevented, Ezek. 18. 14. *&c.* ſo that the reaſon is becauſe they purſue the ſame refractory courſes, till the *Ephah is full*: and ſo theſe are the ſins that next pull down the Anger of God. Now there are theſe three ſigns by which we may diſcern that the Calamities on a People are not meer Trials, but the effects of Divine Diſpleaſure, and ſay, that God who ſends them is angry with ſuch a people.

1. If they are guilty of apparent and ſenſible *Apoſtaſy*. If a People that walk cloſe with God, and maintain the life of Religion in their Profeſſion, are notwithſtanding thus oppreſſed with Troubles, they may take this for a Trial, and accordingly improve it: but if there be notorious

ous decays and too general declinings either in the Duties themſelves, or in the zealous purſuit and practice of them, an increaſe of ſin among them, and now Calamities come upon them, it ſaith that God is angry, and that he is now puniſhing of them for theſe things; for this is according to the threatnings which he hath pronounced: If *Epheſus departs from her firſt love, and neglecteth her firſt works*, ſhe thereby endangers *the removing of the Candleſtick*, Rev. 2. 3. 4.

2. If God hath ſtirred up his Servants to bear witneſs againſt theſe Apoſtacy's, and they are not hereby reformed. God is wont to warn a Profeſſing People before he ſtrikes them; and if his warnings are ſuitably entertained, they are to end there, and the compliance of ſuch a people with them, uſeth to avert the evil: yea though he hath proceeded to ſevere threatnings againſt them yet thus there may a ſtop be put to the execution of them, *Jer.* 18. 7. 8. It is Gods way to ſend Meſſages by his Servants, whom he hath made ſenſible of the decays under which a people are fallen, and to ſtir up an Holy Zeal in them to bear witneſs againſt ſuch back-ſlidings; if theſe be deſpiſed, or not regarded, and the people are not convinced and awakend and reformed; but they hold on in their evil courſes, and it may be decline yet more after all, and there is no appearance of any likelihood that it ſhould be otherwiſe; and now calamities come upon them, this can be judged to be no other but the confirmati-

on of his word in the mouth of his Meſſengers; this therefore is given as a reaſon of their miſeries, *Je.* 44. 4, 5, 6. *Howbeit I ſent unto you all my Servants the Prophets, riſing early and ſending them, ſaying, Oh do not this abominable thing that I hate: But they hearkned not, &c. Wherefore my fury and mine anger was poured forth.* &c.

3. If they were not reclaimed by the higher and eaſier afflictions which they felt. God for the moſt part uſeth to proceed gradually, and when he hath laid ſome more gentle ſtrokes upon a ſinning people that would not be warned to prevent them, he *hearkens to hear* if they will not lay theſe to heart, and recieve inſtruction thereby, ſo as to be reformed, *Jer.* 8. 6. *I hearkned and heard.* But if they are unregardful of theſe, they do not take the hint of them, but ſtill turn to their old courſe, and there follow more grievous and diſtreſſing troubles, theſe are Judgments and the manifeſt fruits of his anger; and this alſo is conſonant to the Rule which himſelf hath given us of his proceeding in this caſe, *Levit.* 26. 18. *And if ye will not for all this hearken unto me, then I will puniſh you ſeven times more for your ſins.*

By theſe Rules a people maw know themſelves to be under the impreſſions of Divine Anger, and that God is undoubtedly managing a controverſy with them: and they are ſure ſigns.

2. *What aſpect there is upon theſe times?* There are ſigns whereby we are to Judge, not only what the

the times are at preſent, but alſo what is their tendency, or what proſpect we may have for the future of the ſtate of our affairs: and this is an enquiry which every one is apt enough to be ſollicitous and anxious about, that is under the apprehenſion of the preſent diſtreſs. who is not ready to ask, what hopes there are that the ſtorm will blow over; or muſt we expect the continuance and encreaſe of our troubles? and to thoſe that make this enquiry for Good ends, and with an heart deſirous to comply with God in his pleaſure, I ſhall take leave to offer ſome General Rules which may be improved to ſatisfaction in this reſpect.

1. That all the afflictions which befall a people at any time, are brought upon them by God. He challengeth himſelf to be the author of this ſort of evil, whenſoever it befalls any; *Am.* 3. 6. *Is there any Evil in the City, and the Lord hath not done it? Iſa.* 45. 7. *I form the Light, and create Darkneſs; I make Peace, and create evil: I the Lord do all theſe things.* There is therefore his Wiſdom, Holineſs, Righteouſneſs, concerned in it; theſe are acts of his ſpecial Government accommodated to the Laws of it: he doth theſe things as he is the *Judge of the whole Earth, and cannot but do right.*

2. That all mediate or ſecond cauſes that are uſed in them, are his inſtruments, and altogether at his diſpoſe. In theſe things God uſeth a mediate Providence in which he improves Creatures

to

to afflict a ſinful people by; and although ſome of theſe are cauſes by counſel, have wills of their own, act upon deliberation in their own minds, have a meaning, and proceed upon reaſons vaſtly different from, and contrary to Gods deſign in it; yet they are entirely under the Management of his Providence, as Rods and Swords; and they can do no more than fulfil his counſell, nor can they go one ſtep farther ſuch was the *Aſſyrian*, *Iſai.* 10. 5. 7. *Oh Aſſyrian the Rod of mine Anger, and the ſtaffe in their hand is mine indignation: howbeit he meaneth not ſo.* So that the whole of theſe afflictions, and every circumſtanc in them is ordered and governed by God.

3. Hence there is nothing ſignal in them, but what he can alter at pleaſure. There is a rational conjecture which men may raiſe by obſerving the poſture of ſecond cauſes, from whence we may judge of the probabilities of things, and in theſe it is that carnal wiſdom is wont to terminate: but, Chriſtians have farther to look; Let the aſpect of ſecond Cauſes be never ſo promiſing, or never ſo ill boding, from whence we are apt either to flatter or frighten ourſelves, yet he can turn it about in a moment whenever he ſees meet; and he hath many ſecret unknown ways to do it in, which cannot poſſibly be fruſtrated if once he be reſolved. He can make men to change their moſt obſtinate reſolutions, as he did by *Pharaoh*, who had made his *heart* ſo *hardned* a-

gainſt

gainſt letting Iſrael go out of his land. He can find men other work to do, which ſhall divert them, in the very birth of their malicious deſigns againſt his people, as he did by *Saul*, to whom, when he was juſt ready to ſieze David, a *Meſſenger comes in haſt to tell him, the Philiſtines had invaded the land.* He can fright men with noiſes in the Air, fill them with Panick fears, and put them to the run, as he did by *Benhadads* Army that beleagured *Samaria*, and would elſe in a very little time have poſſeſſed themſelves of it, and there are many ſuch things as theſe with him. Theſe Signs therefore, though they are not to be deſpiſed, becauſe they are Providentially threatning of calamity, yet they ought not to terrify us, becauſe there is a way for them to be remedied, by engaging God to take our part; and a people may ſay as, *Rom.* 8. 31. *If God be for us, who ſhall be againſt us.*

4. Though God be angry with a ſinning people yet he is placable. His anger may be turned away, and his wrath be appeaſed towards them though the caſe be dangerous yet it is not deſperate. He is a *God of mercy, and there is forgiveneſs with him that he may be feared*: he is a God of Compaſſion, and is *Prone to Pardon*, he hath relenting bowels, and hath exemplified this in Remarkable inſtances, to encourage men to hope in him, notwithſtanding their ſins have procured his diſpleaſure againſt them: even an ungodly *Ahab*, one who had ſold himſelf to do wickedneſs, if upon the

the ſevere threatnings of God declared by the Prophet he *Humbleth himſelf, puts on ſackcloth, and walks ſoftly* ſhall be ſo far taken notice of, that the Judgment ſhall be deferred as to the Compleat execution of it: 1 *Kings.* 21. 29. even an Idolatrous & flagitious *Nineveh*, who were arrived at the height of wickedneſs, if upon the Preaching of *Jonah*, they *Faſt* and *reform* from their debaucheries and oppreſſions, ſhall experience his favour, and he will *repent of the evil* which he was ready to bring upon them, *Jon.* 3 9. and what do theſe ſtand upon record for, but to encourage ſinful men, and People to ſeek Gods mercy in the way of a true and through Repentance?

5. Hence he offers fair terms, and makes Gracious Promiſes in caſe they be complied withal, God is not only wont to give men warning of what he is about to do, before he ſmites them with afflictions, that ſo they may be cautioned to avoid them, by taking due and proper courſes to that end, but he alſo vouchſafes to ſend them meſſages when they are under the rod, and feel the ſmart of it, in which he invites them to a compliance, with him upon eaſy & fair terms; aſſuring them that if they do accept of them he will put a ſtop to his anger, and return again unto them in mercy, and this not once nor twice, but very often. How many ſuch errands, as theſe were the Prophets of old ſent upon to the people of *Iſrael* in evil times? yea and when he had ſo ſent them, *hearkned diligently* to hear what entertainment they

they found as one, that would have taken great de light in the good ſucceſs of them, *Jer:* 8 6.

6. It is of God to work theſe terms in men That a ſinful people do not comply with them is their own fault, and will be charged upon them as the fruit of their obſtinacy, and rebellious frame of heart: but that they do entertain them is of Gods grace: there is in the depraved nature of man a corrupt principle of enmity which ſets him againſt any ſubjection to the will of God, ſo that if he leaves men to their own careleſsneſs & ſtupidity they never will hearken to him; & this dereliction is judicial; but if they be made ſenſible of their folly, & become *willing and obedient*, this is the work of his own ſpirit in them. It is the complaint which *Moſes* makes over them, *Deu.* 29.3,4. *The great temptations which thine eyes have ſeen, the ſigns and the miracles; yet the Lord hath not given you an heart to perceive, and eyes to ſee, and ears to hear, unto this day*; when therefore God invites ſinful men to turn to him, it concerns them to pray unto him to turn them; ſo do they, *pſ.* 80 *ult. turn us again o God of our Salvation.* True Repentance, on which theſe offers of mercy are made unto men, is a Gift of God; & till he works it in them, all means will fail of effecting it.

7. Hence, if God do bring them unto this, it is a ſure ſign for good; it is an evidence that will never fail thoſe in whom it is truly to be found: other grounds of hope, which men are ready to nourish their expectations withal, nay, and very often do prove to be vain preſumptions; but this never will. God for that reaſon gives a people an heart to turn to him from their Backſlidings, becauſe he hath a

mind to return to them in mercy. The promiſe is full which is in the Word of God made to this Condition; and God would have an afflicted people to try him, and ſee whether he will fail of his word or no, *Mal.* 3. 10. *Prove me now herewith ſaith the Lord*, &c. Let a people be never ſo much degenerated, and for it never ſo ſorely diſtreſt; yea let them be all the black tokens imaginable in the face of Providence, of more troubles like to fall upon them; let all the whole courſe of ſecond cauſes bode never ſo ill, yet if that people do humble themſelves deeply before him, ſtir up themſelves in good earneſt to ſeek God, and all orders of men among them, do in their places according to their advantages, ſet themſelves heartily and ſtrenuouſly *to put away the evil that is gotten among them, and amend all their evil ways and doings that have not been good*; there is no doubt to be made of it, but that God will ſave them and do them good: his word is paſt for it, and he will never recede from it.

8. And till God doth this for them, they abide under the threatning. The Dealings of God with an Heathen World, are upon his meer Prerogative, for as they ſtand in relation to the Old Covenant, ſo they are Condemned to all miſery, and their very lives are ſpared upon meer Indulgence, and he meaſures out his Mercy or his Wrath to them in this World according as he ſees meet: whereas he treats with a Profeſſing People, who are in viſible Covenant with him, according to the tenour of that Covenant, in which there are Conditionate Promiſes and Threatnings. Now what concerns ſuch a

People

People as they are a Body, or a Company of Professors ſtanding under the Obligations of ſuch a Covenant, referrs unto this life and the Affairs of it, for they will not be conſidered or treated after this life as a people; and the terms do here ſo run, as we have the account of them, Iſa. 1. 19, 20. *If ye be willing and obedient, ye ſhall eat the good of the Land, but if ye refuſe and rebel ye ſhall be Devoured with the Sword, &c.* other Scripture Expreſſions to the ſame purpoſe. As long then as ſuch a people are not wrought up to a compliance, with theſe terms on which Salvations are promiſed, the threatning under which they were muſt continue upon them; & therefore whatever God may do for them in his Soveraignty, a liberty whereof he reſerves to himſelf, and ſometimes makes uſe of it, firſt to ſave them, & then to reform them, and make theſe his mercies to be melting means to bring them to Repentance, as Ezek. 36. 31. *then ſhall you remember your evil ways,* &c. (i. e. when he had returned and ſettled them in Peace & Proſperity: yet as to their preſent ſtate they are a threatned people, and have all reaſon to expect the Judgments of God.

9. Hence there are theſe ſigns by which we may diſcern the evil of evil times to be in a likely way to continue and increaſe.

1. If iniquity abide and abound among a People after all that God hath done. Not that any times are here to be expected ſo good, as that there ſhall be no Iniquity in them; there will be found ſome of the worſt of men in the beſt of times and places; but if the ſame ſins which procured the Judgments ſtill

them, do remain under the ſame circumſtances, or are rather growing into more power and prevalency, (and indeed Apoſtaſy is ſeldome at a ſtay, till ſuch time as God turns the heart of ſuch a people to himſelf again, but goes in a gradual progreſs) it ſaith, that there is more wrath againſt them. It is a truth in morals as well as in naturals, that *if the Cauſe abide, the effect is not like to ceaſe.* The afflictions which befal ſuch a people, are Divine Teſtimonies againſt ſuch ſins as God hath warned them of, & threatned them for, and they call men to repent of them; and if they do not comply with this call, the Provoeation continues, & God hath ſaid it, that he will go on to puniſh them, *Lev.* 26. if ſuch men ſhould ſay, is there no peace to be expected, his anſwer to them would be like his to him, 2 *King.* 9. 22. *What peace ſo long as theſe Whoredoms abide?* and therefore God pronounceth that Wo upon *Jeruſalem* in *Jer.* 13. 27. *Wo to thee Jeruſalem, wilt thou not be made clean? when ſhall it once be?*

2 If the affliction that God brings upon them make them worſe, inſtead of reforming them. Thoſe troubles which God brings a profeſing people into, after ſuch time as warnings and threatnings have been deſpiſed by them, do belong unto the Diſcipline which he uſeth with ſuch as are in Covenant with him: they are therfore called his *Corrections*, and *Chaſtenings*: the uſe therefore and improvement which they ought to make of them is to *receive inſtruction* by them: they are the tokens and witneſſes of Gods Holy anger, and call upon men to ſee his hand, and ſeek his reconciled favour; and in this way only can they improve

prove them either to Gods acceptance, or their own advantage: If then instead of this they grow more obstinate, and hold their iniquities the faster, and that under the very hand of God, & his awful Judgments that are upon them, when he said *surely they will receive instruction*, & presumed that in *their affliction they would seek him early*; what is this but to stout it out against God; and that must needs be a very ill boding Symptom. This is the fearful brand which God himself sets upon *Ahaz*. 2. *Chron.* 28. 22. *and in the time of his distress did he yet trespass more against the Lord; this is that King Ahaz.* God is very angry when it is so, and declares against it, as that which highly provokes him, he therefore so articleth against them in *Jer.* 2. 30. *In vain have I smitten your Children, they received no Correction*; and it provokes him to give over Correcting them, and take a more awful course with them; to lay by the rod, and to take the Sword into his hand; to turn castigatory punishments into vindictive; hence that *Isa.* 1. 5. *why will you be smitten any more? ye will revolt more and more, q. d.* you grow worse and worse under all the disciplicary means that are used with you, it is therefore high time to give them over, and take another way; there is nothing now but desolation that remains. All the endeavours that are used for Reformation prove unsuccessful. It is sometimes so, that *there is Balm in Gilead, and a Physician there*, and yet there is no good done for it. There are those among a professing People who do Zealously set themselves against the sins of the times and places they live in, and would fain be instrumental, if it might be, of

promoting a ſincere and through Reformation among their People, but all their moſt prudent and Vigilant endeavours fail and are loſt; the ſame iniquities abide, and get head in the midſt of them; Synods may be ſolmenly convened, provoking evils diligently ſought out, ſuitable remedies faithfully preſcribed, wholſome Laws prudently enacted, Churches be called upon to, and engaged in the renewal of the Covenant, and after all this, nothing may be amended; or if the wound be a little skinned over for a while, it breaks out again preſently, and more fearfully. Thus it was with the Kingdom of *Judah* in the times of *Joaſh*, as is at fully recorded in 2 Chr. 24. yea, and how much better was it in the times of that excellent *Joſiah*? we may read the complaint that God makes againſt them, in the Book of *Zephaniah*, and that threatning denounced, Chap. 1. 12, 13. and what indeed is there in ſuch a caſe to be expected, but that God ſhould cauſe his Wrath to fall upon ſuch a people.

4. If Rulers are left to do things which are greatly provoking unto God, *Delirant Reges, plectuntur Achivi.* The Error of Rulers in their places are wont to have awful influence upon the Condition of that people over whom they are ſet; and the groſs miſtakes of thoſe will make all to ſuffer: for they are publick perſons, and the Repreſentatives of their People. If *Saul* in his zeal thinks that the *Gibeonites* ought to be cut off, becauſe they were among the number of the once devoted people; & we know that the former Judges had erred in their ſuffering of them, and for that reaſon had been for ſo many

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1693.

Rules | For the | Discerning | Of the | Present Times. | Recommended | To the People of God, in New-England. | In a | Sermon | Preached on the Lecture in Boston; No- | vember 27th. 1692. | — | By Samuel Willard. | — | [Two lines from Eccl. viii. 5.] | — || Boston Printed by Benjamin Harris, Over-a | gainst the Old-Meeting-House. 1693. 16mo. pp. (1), 30.

Titlepage, *verso* blank; 1–30, "Rules | For the | Discerning | Of the | Present Times. &c. | — | Math. 16. 3. | O Ye Hypocrites, Ye can discern the Face of the | Skie, but can Ye not discern the Signs of the | Times?," followed by a rule, headpiece a line of border pieces, "Finis" at foot of the page. (Boz. 2ds. XVII. 22.)

ages afflicted; and hereupon he attempts; a *three years famine* is procured to the Land by it; 2 *Sam.* 21. *begin.* yea good and wiſe men have been ſometimes left by God when he hath been angry with a people, hereby to procure more Judgments for them, ſo it was in *Davids* caſe, 2 *Sam.* 24. 1. *the Anger of the Lord was kindled againſt Iſrael and he moved David to ſay, Go Number the People.*

5 If a Spirit of Diviſion be gotten amongſt a people. If when the hand of God is heavy upon them, they, inſtead of joyning heart and hand in ſeeking after a redreſs of thoſe things, which God is provoked by, do fall into diſſentions, and there are divided judgments & divided hearts among them; ſo that they ſtudy and endeavour to thwart one the other, & to impede each other in all attempts for good; whereupon nothing can go forward, but all things are put under an unavoidable check; this carries a very ill Omen in it; it is in it ſelf a great puniſhment, and tending to many miſchievous events that will naturally ariſe from it. Some good Interpreters ſo underſtand that in, *Hoſ.* 10. 2. *Their heart is divided; now ſhall they be found faulty.* It is indeed a terrible thing, for a people to be left to ſuch a frame, that when providences call for unanimous endeavours in averting the wrath of God and their ſafety mainly depends on their unity, they expoſe themſelves to become a prey, by their diviſions, *Iſa.* 9. 21.

6. If Gods faithful meſſengers are diſpiſed, and their adviſe is trampled upon. It hath been an uſual thing for God to ſtir up his ſervants in the Miniſtry, to bear their teſtimony at ſuch times, to declare

gainſt the ſins which are Prevailing, and by which Gods diſpleaſure hath bin ſtirred up; & to give counſels and warnings to His People, both publick and private; and it belongs to their office ſo to do, and Gods warrant will bear them out in it: but if they be ſcorned, and their counſels are diſregarded, and they themſelves are cenſured as thoſe that meddle with that which they have nothing to do withal; it is an ill ſign. Such a people ſhall *know* before God hath done *that they had Prophets.* *Aſa* is angry and inraged at the Prophet who brought him a meſſage from God, but it occaſioned him more trouble, 2 *Chro.* 16. *Amaziah* bids the Proph t who came to reprove him for his Idolatry, to meddle with own buſineſs, and not to talk to him; but what follows? 2. *Chron.* 25. 16. *I know that God hath determined to deſtroy thee, becauſe thou haſt done this, and haſt not hearkned unto my counſel.* *Elijah is* counted by *Ahab* to be the *troubler of* Iſrael, becauſe he bore a faithful Teſtimony againſt *Iſraels* ſins: and *Jeremiah* is voted to be a *Man of death*, for his ſerious warnings and admonitions, but theſe were fearful preſages of growing calamities, and were accordingly followed therewithal. God will be deeply provoked at ſuch things, and anſwerable fruits are to be expected. Theſe are ſome of thoſe Rules that are to be made uſe of in judging of the Times: and the application belongs to every one to make according as they are concerned.

FINIS